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ABSTRACT

With the dramatic increase of newly arrived immigrants, it is time for counselors to heighten their awareness of the special issues confronting immigrant families and to consider therapeutic paradigms for assisting immigrant families in their assimilation to the United States. Immigration families undergo cultural transition as they migrate from their country of origin to their adopted country. In the three phases of migration (pre-migration, migration, post-migration), the beliefs and traditions of the immigrant families are challenged. In the process of migration, important family and cultural traditions cannot be expressed or acknowledged in a newly adopted country. Although immigrant families may experience stress and often may assess family dysfunction themselves, immigrant families may not seek treament for their members. Counselors will need to know the immigrant family's world view, interpersonal process, family and institutional roles, and customs. Immigrant families not only bring to counseling situations some imminent problem identified either by the immigrants themselves or by some institution that is involved in their daily life, but they carry with them the experiences of their pre-migration, migration, and post-migration experiences. The immigrant family and the counselor must be mutually involved in a process of conversation in order to identify the needs and concerns of the immigrant family. (ABL)

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Counseling Issues with Immigrant Families

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Introduction:

With the dramatic increase of newly arrived immigrants, the time is ripe for counselors to heighten their awareness of the special issues confronting immigrant families and to consider therapeutic paradigms for assisting immigrant families in their assimilation to the United States. In just one year, 1985-86, the admission of 636,000 individuals as permanent "resident aliens" was recorded by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In contrast, for the four year period from 1975-1979, 449,000 immigrants entered the United States. This increase in immigrants over the decade from 1975-1986 resulted in a total number of 1,767,000 immigrants, including 1.3 million refugees, coming into the United States.

The intent of this paper is to address issues relating to this new immigrant population important to counselors who encounter immigrant families in their work setting. In this paper the following issues will be discussed:

1) Definition of Immigrant Families
2) The Immigrant Family's Experiences
3) The Effects of the Immigration Experience
4) Factors Affecting Counseling with Immigrant Families
5) A Counseling Perspective with Immigrant Families

Definition of Immigrant Families

In the broadest meaning of the word, immigrant, most citizens of the United States are immigrants. The word immigrant in this paper, however, refers specifically to "recently-arrived" or "immigrant American" immigrants. The distinction between these immigrant groups needs to be made clear in order to understand the immigrant experience.

"Immigrant-descendants" are those whose ancestors came from a foreign country to settle permanently in the United States. They compromise a majority of United States citizens and are the second, third, or fourth generation immigrants who have had two or more decades to assimilate and acculturate into their adopted country. The "immigrant-Americans" are those whose parents are foreign born yet were born in the United States. These immigrants are in the process of assimilating into a different society and culture. The "recently-arrived" immigrant, some of whom are refugees, a special condition of immigrant experience, are confronted by tasks required for adaptation to a new country.

More specifically related to immigrant families, these three states of immigrant family acculturation are summarized in Table 1 (Falicov, 1988) and highlight the differences in the acculturation process for each generation of immigrant families. The ecosystem levels (macro and exo, meso, micro) refer to the layers of

environmental context that any immigrant encounters. Every immigrant family as it progresses from one stage of acculturation to another responds to the dimensions within each ecosystem level.

Table 1 is based upon the match between a family and their environment. When immigrant families, in the process of making adjustments to a new country, discover that the ecological fit between themselves and their environment is incongruous, the immigrant family often experiences stress. Often the greater the incongruity or the poorer the ecological fit between immigrant family and environment, the greater the stress experienced by the immigrant family. In some instances, this stress can lead to impaired functioning of the immigrant family. The stress created by an incongruous ecological fit is exacerbated by the individual or collective drama created by the personal trauma and cultural disorientation of people who feel persecution or the fear of persecution.

The Immigrant Family's Experiences

Immigrant families undergo cultural transition as they migrate from their country of origin to their adopted country. In the three phases of migration: 1) premigration, 2) migration, and 3) post migration, the beliefs and traditions of the immigrant families are challenged.

Prior to leaving their own country, immigrant families have a set of cultural values and norms, a family structure and a developmental history. Specifically, families within any culture have set-up rules for living together and ways for interacting with their environment.

For immigrant families the migration usually creates separation from extended family members and often severs nuclear families. Trauma, loss and upheaval are commonly part of the immigrant and refugee family's migration experience. For refugee families violence is often part of the experience. Throughout the migration experience, immigrant families often have little control over their environment and find difficulty in predicting events.

The post migration experience may continue to impose trauma, upheaval and loss upon immigrant families. In the new country of adoption immigrant families are often faced with societal and cultural issues such as economic survival, racism and cultural conflicts.

Each of these migration experiences, not unlike immigrant acculturation stages, requires that immigrant families develop coping and adaptive skills. Several factors influence how well immigrant families can cope and function throughout their migration experience: a) the existence of family support systems during one or more of the stages of migration, b) the maintenance of family structure, rules and regulatory behaviors, and c) the "fit" between the family and the adopted environment, a factor affecting the post migration experience.

The Effects of the Immigration Experience Upon Immigrant Families

From family systems theory there are two major forces that affect family behavior: 1) morphostasis, a homeostatic force that is a set of regulatory behaviors for maintaining stability, order, and control in family life and 2) morphogenesis, a force associated with growth, development, and change (Steinglass, 1985). All families include behaviors in their family interactions that both maintain order, stability and control of their interactions, yet create changes as a way of moving the family and individuals in it toward greater growth and development.

Immigrant families in the premigration period have learned to balance these two forces (morphostatic and morphogenetic) within a known and prescribed ecological system. The migration experience disrupts the balance and forces the immigrant family to recreate this balance in a new environment where known and prescribed methods for maintaining the balance are unknown and unpredictable. Family structure, basic family rules (the prescribed processes for family interactions) of the premigration experience must be modified and sometimes reconstructed in the migration and post migration experiences.

When components of immigrant families separate and then undergo permanent loss and isolation from their country and the family of origin becomes disrupted, elements of family structure such as boundaries for identifying a family unit, alliances among existing and extended

family members, and new designations of who is in charge, a hierarchical issue, must be reevaluated.

In the process of migration, regulatory behaviors such as daily routines, family rituals, and problem solving episodes of the premigration experience of the immigrant family, are often disguised and altered. Important family and cultural traditions cannot be expressed or acknowledged in a newly adopted country.

Factors Affecting Counseling with Immigrant Families

Although immigrant families may experience stress and often times may assess for themselves family dysfunction, immigrant families may not seek treatment for their members. Premigration experiences influence their evaluation of their migration and post-migration experiences as well as influence their concept of "helping". In addition, communication styles, roles in the family, and the use of members outside of the family affect their expectations for counseling.

Counselors and "helping" agencies may have expectations of immigrant families and limited knowledge for understanding the family that is very different from the own. Counselors will need to "know," from many perspectives, about immigrant family's, a) world view, belief and value system, b) interpersonal and intrapersonal process, c) family and institutional roles as a framework for learning, and d) customs and rituals. Yet, for counselors to "know" these perspectives may not be enough, for counselors need to

communicate to them their understanding (in order to "join" with immigrant families).

This type of "joining-understanding" is important in counseling with any family. But, unique to counseling with immigrant families is the explicit information about the ecological fit between the immigrant family's premigration, migration, and post-migration experiences. Immigrant families may be able to express concern about their basic needs such as food and shelter but may be less certain how to convey their distress about social isolation, adjustment difficulties related to relocation, and cultural-language differences.

Implications for Counseling with Immigrant Families

Immigrant families not only bring to counseling situations some imminent problem either identified by them or some institution (eg. school) that is involved in their daily life, but they carry with them the experiences of their premigration, migration and post-migration experiences. Counselors may or may not be aware of these immigrant family's experiences. In turn, the immigrant family may or may not be able or willing to express them. The first stage of the counseling must then be for both the counselor and the immigrant family to engage in a therapeutic relationship. The immigrant family and the counselor must be mutually involved in a process of "conversation" in order to identify the needs, concerns of the

immigrant family. Even though the counselor cannot assume to have a complete understanding of the complex immigrant experience, the relationship with the immigrant family can be enhanced if the counselor has some knowledge about cultural differences and a different world view. Yet, during the actual family counseling session, the counselor must explore the "fit" between his or her pre[s]session knowledge and the experiences of the immigrant family as the members describe it. This interaction is a mutual process, actually a therapeutic conversation between the counselor and the family, that allows for corrections and additions. Therapeutic conversation can be useful in the involvement of any family in counseling. With immigrant families, elements of therapeutic conversation may be of particular importance since the quest for understanding and the fit between the family and their environment is not predictable but is exploratory.

The following elements of a therapeutic conversation may be particularly useful in counseling immigrant families:

*1. The therapist is a respectful listener who does not understand too quickly (if ever).

2. The therapist asks questions, the answers to which require new questions.

3. The therapist takes the responsibility for the creation of a conversation context that allows for mutual collaboration in the problem-defining (and solving) process.

*From Anderson, H. & Goolishian, H. (1987). Human systems as linguistic systems: Some preliminary and evolving ideas about the implications for clinical theory. Family Process. In press.

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TABLE 1 Stresses of Cultural Transition

Ecosystem level	Dimensions	Acculturation stages: Immigrant family (first generation)	Immigrant/American family (second generation)	American family of immigrant descent (third generation)
Macro	*Value Systems*	Cultural Dissonance	Emergent Consonance	Biculturalism, Assimilation
Exo (Society)	*Immigrant Status*	Legal Alien, Undocumented	Undocumented, Citizen	Citizen
	Economic Status	Unemployment, underemployment	Underemployment, Employment	Stable
	Reception	Discrimination, Welcome	Equal or Less Discrimination	Less Discrimination
Meso (Institutions)	*Language*	Monolingual Native	Bilingual	Monolingual Adoptive
	Institutional Use	Very Limited or Excessive	Greater Reliance	Widespread Use
	Social Network	Fear & Alienation	Sense of Marginality	Sense of Belonging
		Lack of Models	Emergent Models,	Demands Equality
		Ethnic Community	Emergent Participation	Peer Models
	Ethnic Identity	Split, Idealization, Denigration	Marginal, Mimetic, Duality	Ethnic, or American, Integrated
Micro (Family)	*Adaptation*	Culture Shock Situational Problems	Moderate Adaptation	High Adaptation
	Membership	Migratory Separations and Reunions	Stable	Stable
	Supports	Very Low to High	Moderate	Moderate
	Organization (Proximity, hierarchies)	In Flux to Cope, e.g., increased marital proximity, decreased extended proximity.	Transitional Patterns: e.g., intergenerational conflicts, incongruent hierarchies.	Patterns Rigidified or Restructured
	Developmental Norms	Original, or Shift in Dominant dyad	In Flux or Conflict	Integrated or Parallel

First generation: All family members are born in native country. *Second generation*: Some members born in country of origin, others in country of adoption. *Third generation*: All members born in country of adoption.